

# Sharing Spaces, Building Dreams: How one commune inspired another (and another)

A catalog essay for the exhibition **RADICAL: 50 YEARS OF LIBRE INTENTIONAL ARTIST COMMUNITY** at Gallery of Contemporary Art, Colorado Springs, CO

by Erin Elder

It was a time of great upheaval. The world was at war with itself and the earth cried out. Capitalism had made slaves of people, systematizing a messy codependence between its winners and its losers. The young people were horrified, insulted, angry, cynical, indifferent, immobilized, mobilized, naive, wistful, hopeless, and also sometimes hopeful. They believed that, using the refuse of a wasteful society, they could build a new world. They left the cities in droves, took to the nation's highways, and began to look for land on which to live together differently.

Drop City emerged from such a mire as a vibrantly cobbled-together community on the outskirts of Trinidad, Colorado. It was 1965, and although communes have existed since the beginning of time, it was the first of its kind and set the standard for the two thousand plus that appeared in its wake. On six acres of goat pasture, a small group of artists made a constellation of buildings from junked car roofs and stolen railroad timbers, bottle tops, and whatever they could salvage. These domed structures, or "zomes," became the crystalline vernacular of a growing counterculture. Drop City was more than "a society built from scratch," and more than a giant sculpture; it was a total artwork, an opportunity for these artists to *be* their art, working with lifestyle as their primary medium. Word of Drop City spread, and it quickly became a way station for other artists and counterculturalists who vagabonded from one coast to the other in search of alternatives.

Linda Fleming spent time at Drop City. She lived relatively nearby often sought camaraderie at the commune. As a sculptor, she marveled at the innovative architecture emerging there; she was far less interested in the steady stream of random visitors, the bevy of hangers-on, and the shared closet of clothes. When she and her then husband, Dean, set out to build a place of their

own, they carried with them a hand-drawn plan for a geodesic dome and the desire for more personal space. They had met as artists in New York and were serious about their work. While they were invested in alternative lifestyles, their primary concern was for studio space.

By 1968, hippies, Buddhists, hermits, artists, and other new age pioneers were pouring into the American Southwest, where experimentation and spiritual mysticism met with cheap land and grand vistas. Linda, Dean, a man named Peter Rabbit and his wife Judy had heard about a man who had purchased land for a commune in New Mexico, and they went in search of him after locating an available 360-acre parcel in Colorado. The man agreed to buy the land, no strings attached, and with this grand gesture he imbued the fledgling commune with its landmark generous spirit.

Libre grew quickly but intentionally. Groups of friends and newcomers arrived to the dry, sloping hills to gaze out on the Huerfano Valley. Members had to be unanimously voted in, and everyone was expected to build their own homes in an agreed-upon location, out of view of the others. The homes ranged from domes to jewel-shaped inverted A-frames, from barn-style houses to Gaudiesque compilations, each born from rawness; in the beginning there was no electricity, running water, or even roads. Communes appeared throughout the valley, which held them in its bowl-like topography. Despite the magnetic culture emerging in the area, Linda and Dean spent most of their time in New York or San Francisco. Libre was a node on their migration: a seasonal refuge, a place to return to, a space to make art. For Linda, Libre became a touchstone for the passage of time and for so many dear friendships; much more than her mountainside studio, it became her heart's true home.

I visited Libre for the first time ten years ago, for the commune's fortieth birthday. Linda had invited me to help her plan a "brainstorm" to anchor the revelry in some guided thoughtfulness around the commune's legacy and future. We invited a multigenerational group to take part in sharing circles and diagrammed conversation over the course of the celebration weekend. The Gen X folks talked about debt, jobs, the life of cities, while the original communards discussed their hopes and fears about sharing the place they most loved. We batted around the idea of a residency program as a way to bring young people in for distinct periods of time. But for all the community-mindedness, there was no consensus.

While Libre's future remained undefined, my own had begun. Out of this visit and the many that followed, I developed a do-it-yourself spiritedness, a deep longing to build a place, and the moral support of my chosen Libre family to help make it happen. In fact, after a 2009 visit, during which my sister and I helped Linda and her current husband, Michael, construct a small building, we traveled south to Taos, where we spontaneously purchased a tiny piece of land. Within a few months, PLAND emerged.

PLAND was nothing like Libre. Given its small size and our commitment to building with cast-off materials, it might have had at least some resemblance to Drop City. But PLAND was its own kind of place, born out of its own unique circumstances. Short for "Practice Liberating Art through Necessary Dislocation," PLAND was a residency program that supported experimental and research-based projects in the context of the Taos mesa. Residence was core to our mission, as we aimed to "make a place by living in it." Over four seasons, fourteen residents came from all over the world to have a direct experience of life without electricity or running water or a cell phone signal, in one of the most wild and beautiful corners of the West. PLAND residents built rainwater filtration systems, a staircase, a wood-burning sauna, and an outhouse. They researched the history of our land and witched for water. Some artists made poetic sculptures in the landscape, while others turned bathing into a ritual performance. One artist even made a urine-powered battery.

After four years, PLAND had run its course. We had hosted school groups and annual work parties, spoken at national conferences, published papers, and been finalists for a Creative Capital grant. Over time we became consumed by grant reports, program administration, IRS regulations, and increasing concerns over liability, and so we decided to document everything on a website, sell the land, and wrap things up.

I learned a lot about endings through observing communes, most of which were never meant to be full-time, forever kinds of places. Drop City was an experimental artwork that lasted a vibrant seven years before it returned to the trash heap from which it came. Though Libre has endured, nearly all the other regional communes quietly disbanded, were evicted, or fell to ruin. Many have sold their land or no longer own it in common. And though most of the communes no longer exist, they gave rise to things that do. Libreans and their kin kept the Gardner School alive when it was threatened with closure; they started a local radio station, small businesses,

bakeries, music festivals, and much, much more. Communes are incubators for alternative living experiments, lifelong relationships, and so many big ideas.

In studying communes, failure is always a prevailing question. If it didn't last forever, was it worthwhile? Did it fail? Artists deeply understand the importance of experimentation, of the improvisational experience, of simply trying things out. Artists learn by doing; they adapt and change things and when necessary, they move on. In this way, failure doesn't exist. For those who create temporary, arising, DIY places and projects, beginnings and endings are often life-changing encounters with what is possible. And in this time of great upheaval, when the earth cries out, we need transformative experiences more than ever.

Would PLAND have happened without our visit to Libre? It's hard to know. Would Libre have happened without Linda's direct experience of Drop City? Impossible to say. Are residency programs the new communes? Perhaps. What I do know is that experiences give rise to other experiences because it's people and places that impact us most. In its vibrant fifty years, Libre has been a cherished place and a beloved community that has inspired countless people to do and dream. Happy birthday, Libre! Cheers to all that's yet to come.